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LONGFELLOW'S SCANDINAVIAN TRANSLATIONS

The tendency on the part of many of our literary critics to regard Longfellow merely as the poet of the commonplace amounts to an obsession. By dwelling upon certain of his admittedly inferior poems and by emphasizing his title of the children's poet these professional detractors try to give the impression that Longfellow is quite unworthy of the consideration of serious thinkers. Fortunately, not all students of our national literature join in this chorus of depreciation and, by using a saner method of criticism, serious writers like Mr. Paul Elmer More and others, separating the wheat from the chaff, point to many poems and classes of poems in which Longfellow won real distinction among the major poets. In at least four directions Longfellow cannot fail to arouse the admiration and approval of the truly discriminating reader. In several of his longer poems, notably 'Evangeline,' 'Hiawatha' and 'Tales of a Wayside Inn,' we find a skill in narration not equalled by any other American poet and surpassed by very few English poets. In all his poetical writings, from the earliest to the latest, there is a mastery of verse form and a fine verbal felicity that show the master technician. In his later years Longfellow developed a technique and expressed a depth of feeling in the difficult form of the Petrarchan sonnet that wring enthusiastic praise from the editor of this body of his poems, Mr. Ferris Greenslet. Finally, as a translator and an imitator of foreign poetical forms Longfellow is easily first among American writers and it is doubtful whether he has been equalled in this field by any of the English poets.

Although in the mere matter of volume Longfellow's German translations probably occupy first place, it is perhaps not unreasonable to attach greater importance as to quality to the renderings from the Scandinavian, especially from the Swedish. In this connection one name stands out in special prominence, that of Tegnér, who seems to have made a more powerful appeal to Longfellow than did any other foreign poet, and to whom he seems to give a higher place than to his great Danish

contemporary Oehlenschläger. The larger space devoted to the latter in *Poets and Poetry of Europe*, to which the reviewer of the book in the *North American Review* takes exception, is undoubtedly due to the large number of English translations that were available, as well as to the immense bulk of the Danish writer's work. In the introduction to his valuable little book, *Poems by Tegnér*, published in 1914 by the American-Scandinavian Foundation, Mr. Paul Lieder quotes the following interesting suggestion from Edmund Gosse's essay on Runeberg in *Northern Studies*: "Between Tegnér and Runeberg the natural link is wanting. This link properly consists, it appears to me, in Longfellow, who is an anomaly in American literature, but who has the full character of a Swedish poet, and who, had he been born in Sweden, would have completed exactly enough the chain of style that ought to unite the idealism of Tegnér to the realism of Runeberg. The poem of *Evangeline* has really no place in Anglo-Saxon poetry; in Swedish it would accurately enough express a stage in the progress of literature which is now unfilled."

But before considering the translations from the Scandinavian a word may be said about the poems conceived in the Scandinavian spirit, for which no originals exist, and the paraphrases from the *Heimskringla* in the *Musician's First Tale*. Ever since the time of Gray Scandinavian themes have appealed to many English poets. Gray and his contemporaries, however, had no knowledge of the Scandinavian languages, their sources being English and Latin translations. Longfellow enjoyed the advantage of a thorough knowledge of Swedish, both in the spoken and the written form, and a less accurate grasp of Danish and Old Norse. He had spent a whole summer too in Sweden and Denmark and his article in the *North American Review* on Tegnér showed that he had absorbed much of the spirit of rural Swedish life. With this unusual linguistic and cultural equipment, combined with his remarkable capacity to assimilate and express alien feelings in finished poetical form it is not strange that Longfellow on several occasions produced masterpieces, compared to which Gray's imitations seem like very faint echoes from the North. For an account of Longfellow's studies in Scandinavia reference may be made to

chapter XV of Samuel Longfellow's *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*.

Although judged simply as a poem *The Skeleton in Armor* is probably the finest of Longfellow's poems of this class, it can be regarded as Scandinavian only in theme. In the following appreciation W. H. Prescott probably has in mind the general medieval coloring of both poems rather than any specific Northern suggestion in the first one: "In two or three ballads, especially the 'Skeleton in Armor' and the 'Hesperus,' you have seized the true coloring of the antique. Nothing better have I seen in this way since the 'Ancient Mariner.'"¹ There is a marked absence of specifically Northern local color, either of form or reference. The hero is not a convincing Viking and throughout a mere change of names would suggest quite a different setting. Far otherwise is it with two poems so true to type that they read like superlatively fine translations of Old Norse poems. The first of these is the *Prelude* to the *First Musician's Tale*, *The Challenge of Thor*. Wisely avoiding the regular scheme of alliteration and assonance of Old Norse skaldic poetry, as alien to the modern reader, and with equal wisdom omitting end rime, which would destroy the archaic effect of the imitation, Longfellow has succeeded in producing a poem full, both in form and content, of the spirit of the pagan past. As this poem is probably not as familiar as it deserves to be, the first stanza may properly be quoted:

I am the God Thor,
I am the War God,
I am the Thunderer!
Here in my Northland,
My fastness and fortress,
Reign I forever!

As a sort of pendant to this, but written twenty-eight years later, is *Tegnér's Drapa*, originally bearing the less distinctive title *Tegnér's Death*. In Longfellow's diary for October 14th, 1847 occurs the following reference to this poem: "Went to town, after finishing a poem on Tegnér's death, in the spirit of the Old Norse poetry."² Although Tegnér died November 2nd,

¹ *Life*, I: 412.

² *Life*, II: 96.

1846 Longfellow apparently did not learn of it until some months later, for in the diary occurs the following under April 5th, 1847: "Death of Tegnér. Poem by Böttiger." The author of the poem was C. W. Böttiger, a son-in-law of the poet and editor of his *Collected Works*. Although the same six verse unrimed stanza is used in the *Drapa* as in *The Challenge of Thor* it is with a difference, the quieter theme of the later poem being expressed in three stress iambs, while the vigorous action of the pagan poem is suggested by the quicker two stress dactyls and trochees. As in the earlier poem we hear the defiance of the older and fiercer divine order, in the *Drapa* is expressed the triumph of the new dispensation. Especially fine is the ninth stanza, in which the poet passes from the account of the death of Balder the Beautiful to the real theme of the poem:

So perish the old Gods!
But out of the sea of Time
Rises a new land of song,
Fairer than the old.
Over its meadows green
Walk the young bards and sing.

Tegnér's latest American editor is quite justified in saying of this extract: "This might serve as the text of a discourse on comparative literature; it indicates the significance of such international relationships as that of Longfellow and Tegnér."

A detailed consideration of the *Musician's First Tale*, *The Saga of King Olaf*, is quite beyond the limits of this paper. It stands midway between the three original poems on Scandinavian themes and the translations proper. It is, with the exception of the Prelude and the last canto, a free rendering in varied verse form, with some additions by the author, of portions of the *Heimskringla*. The concluding canto, the twenty-second, *The Nun of Nidaros*, is wholly original with Longfellow, and like the *Prelude*, it is in unrimed six verse stanza form. The rhythm is two stress iambic, anapestic, most of the verses being hypercatalectic. Occasionally the measure changes to the trochaic dactylic, as in the sixth stanza:

'Cross against corslet,
Love against hatred,
Peace cry for war-cry!

Patience is powerful;
 He that o'ercometh
 Hath power o'er the nations.'

In stanza nine the two measures alternate throughout the stanza, as:

'Stronger than steel
 Is the sword of the spirit;
 Swifter than arrows
 The light of the truth is,
 Greater than anger
 Is love and subdueth!'

Varnhagen³ has identified the chapters of Snorre that serve as Longfellow's source and he has also pointed out the interesting fact that the verse form of most of the cantos may be referred to different Danish and Swedish ballads. Both the five stress iambic and the six stress dactylic blank verse are also used and one canto is in the skeltonic verse. He has shown, too, by undoubted internal evidence, that Longfellow used Laing's translation of the *Heimskringla*. More important, however, than the internal evidence, though it is not noted by the German scholar, is the following entry in Longfellow's diary for February 25th, 1859. "The thought struck me this morning, that a very good poem might be written on the Saga of King Olaf, who converted the North to Christianity. Read the old Saga in the *Heimskringla*, Laing's translation. It is very curious. 'The Challenge of Thor' will serve as a prelude."⁴ In spite of this double evidence of Longfellow's indebtedness to Laing's version, it is possible, perhaps probable, that the poet made some use of the Old Norse version, as it is known that while in Copenhagen he studied the language with C. C. Rafn.

The *Musician's Second Tale*, *The Ballad of Camilhan*, is curiously reminiscent of *The Ancient Mariner*, although it is not in the ballad measure. The resemblance is especially striking in the following stanza:

The southwest wind blew fresh and fair,
 As fair as wind could be;
 Bound for Odessa, o'er the bar,
 With all sail set, the Valdemar
 Went proudly out to sea.

³ Hermann Varnhagen: *Longfellow's Tales of a Wayside Inn und ihre Quellen*, Berlin, 1884.

⁴ *Life*, 11, 378.

This ballad belongs in the class of themes most familiarly represented by the various treatments in prose and verse of the story of the Flying Dutchman, but Longfellow's immediate source has not been identified. The Musician refers to the tale indefinitely in the Interlude as follows:

To-day I give you but a song,
An old tradition of the North.

The *Musician's Third Tale*, *The Mother's Ghost*, in its faithful rendering of the original Danish ballad, *Moderen under Mulde*, reminds one of Scott, the only early nineteenth century English poet who was able to enter fully into the spirit of the medieval ballad. This tale differs from the other two in being a very close rendering of an original Danish ballad. It is significant that Longfellow gives the correct translation of the unusual form *modige been*, 'sorrowful bones.' It is almost certain, too, that the rendering of *De hunde de tudde saa højt i sky*, "The watch-dogs howled aloud to the sky," is correct, though of course *i sky* might mean "in terror." This latter meaning, however, is modern and we should not therefore look for it in an early ballad.

In his introduction to *Poems by Tegnér*, Mr. Lieder refers to an article by Longfellow in *The North American Review* for July, 1837 as follows: "Longfellow's review of *Frithiof* is of importance in itself because, so far as I have been able to find out, it is the first public notice in the United States, not only of Tegnér, but of Scandinavian literature."⁵ An examination of the *Review*, however, reveals three earlier articles in this subject, two of them by the leading authority on international law at that time in this country, if not in the world, Mr. Henry Wheaton. In view of his position as the apparent pioneer in Scandinavian studies in this country and especially of his having possibly first attracted Longfellow's attention to the subject, the author deserves at least passing notice here. Wheaton's interest in the Scandinavian languages and literatures was evidently the direct result of his appointment as chargé d'affaires at Copenhagen, where he served with distinguished success from 1827 until 1835. In the latter year he was transferred to Berlin,

⁵ Paul Robert Lieder, *Poems by Tegnér*, XVII.

where he later became minister, being recalled in 1846 to make room for a political appointment. This failure on the part of the administration to retain a tried and valued public servant aroused the indignation of good citizens very much as the removal of Motley from the English mission did almost quarter of a century later. Wheaton studied not only Danish but Swedish and Old Norse as well and, as was natural in a student of jurisprudence, he studied and wrote upon both the Danish and Old Norse legal codes. Among his later reviews is a short notice of Rask's *Dansk Grammatik*. In several of his articles he expresses his admiration of the great Danish scholar, whom he must have known personally. In 1831 he published a *History of the Northmen* (London and Philadelphia) which enjoyed the distinction of being favorably reviewed by Washington Irving in *The North American Review* for October, 1832. This review is probably the only evidence that Irving was especially interested in the history of the North and we have his own words to the effect that he attached very little importance to the story of the early discovery of America by the Northmen. But then his *Columbus* was written several years before Rafn published the sources. Wheaton's work is of special interest to us in connection with Longfellow, as it includes some criticism of the early Scandinavian literature, together with translations of some of the poetry and prose, including the last strophe of the *Death Song of Ragnar Lodbrok*. Unfortunately I have not had access to the book and have had to depend upon Irving's rather full review.

The title of Wheaton's first review does not suggest its real scope, as it is headed *Anglo-Saxon Language and Literature*, and it was suggested by two books, Rask's *Grammar of the Anglo Saxon Tongue*, Translated by B. Thorpe, London, 1830, and J. J. Coneybeare's *Illustrations of Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, London, 1826. Its only appeal to the student of Longfellow consists in its very careful comparison of Old English and Old Norse poetry, which indicates a surprising familiarity with the latter subject. It appeared in *The North American Review* for October, 1831. I was led to examine it by a blunder. Knowing that Longfellow had published an article in *The North American Review* with this title and assuming that this was the article, I was immediately fired with enthusiasm at being in a

position to prove that Longfellow's acquaintance with the Scandinavian anticipated his visit to the North by several years. My enthusiasm mounted to fever point on reading in a foot note to the review a reference to an earlier article by the same author, dealing with the *Eddas* and Swedish history. I have not yet quite recovered from the reaction when I found by a reference to a letter printed in the *Life* that Longfellow's article was not published until 1838 and an examination of the index to the *Review* revealed the authorship of both articles. If all students would be honest I imagine that many of them would have to acknowledge that some of their best results have been reached by similar blunders. I can only bless my lucky star that I was spared from furnishing a Roman holiday to my fellow students of Scandinavian literature.

Wheaton's first treatment of Scandinavian literature is found in a review of *Edda Saemundar hins froða . . . Pars 111*. Magnussen (Finnur), 1828 and E. G. Geijer's *Svea-Rikes Häfder*, 1, 1825. It appeared in *The North American Review* for January, 1829. It is of special interest as containing a number of extracts from the *Older Edda*, translated by the reviewer. The second part of the article is really a survey of the leading early Scandinavian historians, beginning with Saxo Grammaticus. Geijer's work, which suggested this part of the review, is dismissed with a few concluding words of praise.

The third Scandinavian article appeared April, 1836 and is entitled *Popular Poetry of the Teutonic Nations*. The portion which concerns us is based upon the following books: *Danske Viser fra Middelalderen . . .* collected by Nierup, Rahbeck, and Abrahamson, 3 vols., Copenhagen, 1813, and *Svenska Folkvisor*, by Geijer and Afzelius, 5 vols., Stockholm, 1814-1816. The article contains a number of translations, to which the author refers as follows: "Fidelity is the only merit to which we can lay claim." The author of this interesting but not especially original article is Mrs. Edward Robinson, whose books and some of whose articles were published under the pen name Talvj, formed from the initials of her maiden name, Therese Albertine Louise von Jakob. For an account of this German-American writer reference may be made to Irma Elizabeth Voigt's *The Life and Works of Mrs. Therese Robinson (Taltj)*, Urbana, 1913.

A number of references to and translations from the Scandinavian from as early as 1819 were found, but a discussion of these would carry us too far afield and it must be left for later separate treatment. Mention should also be made of George P. Marsh, author of the first Old Norse grammar written by an American.

Longfellow made no translations from the Old Norse, the nearest approach to this being his paraphrase of the *Heimskringla*, or from modern Norwegian writers and, except for the ballads, his translations from the Danish are limited to two poems, Evald's *King Christian* and Baggesen's *Childhood*. The ballads are *The Elected Knight* and *The Mother's Ghost*, the latter already discussed in connection with *Tales of a Wayside Inn*. The rendering of the second ballad is in no way inferior to that of the first. Evald's poem is also admirably rendered and I find no justification for the unfavorable criticism quoted by one of Longfellow's biographers: "He quite failed to interpret the lyric rush of Johannes Ewald's 'King Christian,' the high national hymn of Denmark."⁶ On the contrary, Longfellow's rendering seems to me to preserve to a remarkable degree the force and beauty of the original. Concerning the second effort, I see no reason to change my opinion, expressed fourteen years ago: "It is just the kind of poem that Longfellow might have written himself in his best mood. Had his knowledge of Danish equalled that of the sister tongue he might have added another perfect translation to his collection. As it is, I am inclined to regard it as a comparative failure. . . . The failure must be attributed in part to the difficulty of the subject. . . . If we can use the adjective in connection with Longfellow, the translation is wooden; all the charm is lost."⁷ To poems of this class we may apply the epigram of Georg Brandes, "Lyrical poetry is untranslatable, but it is often translated." On first reading it I was inclined to believe that the rendering in the second stanza, "And rode a 'horse-back on best father's knee," was an incorrect translation of *Bedstefader*, but a reference to the original shows that Baggesen wrote *bedste Fader* and the content indicates a contrast between the parents. A

⁶ W. S. Kennedy, *Henry W. Longfellow*, 270.

⁷ *The Pathfinder*, 1: 8, 55.

less literal rendering, like 'dear father,' however, would have been somewhat more idiomatic. Less literal are the following:

- 1:4 Og derfor taenker jeg den mangen Gang,
And therefore I recalled it with delight,
4:1 Da saae jeg Maanen ned bag Hera glide,
I saw the moon behind the island fade.

In his article in *The North American Review*, already mentioned, Longfellow translated portions of the third and the nineteenth canto of the *Frithiof's Saga* and so fine is the rendering that readers of today share Tegnér's regret that Longfellow did not translate the whole, thus assuring us of at least one perfect translation. It is the same sort of regret that must be felt towards H. H. Boyesen's translations of Ibsen's *Brand*, which were confined to the songs. In the translation of the nineteenth canto Longfellow omits stanzas 4, 6-11 inclusive and the last eleven stanzas. Canto three is also considerably condensed. A comparison of the rendering of both cantos in the article and in its later form, published in *Poets and Poetry of Europe* shows a number of alterations, which, I believe, have not been noted before. Those in canto three are as follows, the verses occurring in the article being given first:

Birchwoods crowned the top of the hills, but over the sloping hill-side
Sprang up the golden corn . . .
Birchwoods crowned the summits, but over the down-sloping hill-sides
Flourished the golden corn . . . 3
Their manes all knotted with red, their hoofs all white with steel shoes
Knotted with red their manes, and their hoofs all whitened with steel shoes. 16
Through the hall
Thorough the hall. 20
Oden
Odin! 23
Thorston
Thorstein 26
night clouds
the night cloud 27
Braga
Bragé 31
burned the fire-flames for ever
burned for ever the fire-flames. 35
in the hall did glisten
in the banquet-hall glistened. 41

Ever cast she her eyes down and blushed; in the shield too her image.
 Blushed likewise ever as she; this gladdened the drinking champions.
 Ever she cast down her eyes and blushed; in the shield her reflection
 Blushed too, even as she; and thus gladdened the hall-drinking champions. 44

The variations in canto nineteen are as follows:

. . . after them Valkyrian comes.
 . . . after them Valkyria comes. 16
 . . . there sings a coal-black bird upon the bough.
 . . . there sings a coal-black bird upon a bough. 21
 Coward, wilt thou murder sleep! and a defenceless old man slay?
 Coward, wilt thou murder slumber? a defenceless old man slay! 27
 Whate'er thou winn'st, thou cann'st not win a hero's fame this way.
 Whatso'er thou winn'st, thou canst not win a hero's fame this way. 28

The standard text is eclectic, sometimes following the original article, sometimes the form of *Poets and Poetry of Europe*, occasionally introducing a third reading. Like Wordsworth, Longfellow frequently filed his poems after publication and this tendency is as marked in the original poems as in the translations.

In *Poets and Poetry of Europe* Longfellow substituted the rendering of Strong, as more nearly realizing his ideal of a translation than the version that was reviewed in the article. In the article the following cantos are wholly omitted: I, II, V, VI, VIII, IX, XI, XII, XIII, XVI, XXII. The extracts from the other cantos vary in length from a few verses found in the introduction, to complete cantos, in the anthology. In *Poets and Poetry of Europe* the following cantos appear: I, III, IV, VI, X, XI, XIX.

The following statement by Mr. Lieder in his introduction to *The Children of the Lord's Supper* is only in part true, as a number of differences in spelling and capitalization were noted between the text of the first edition and that of the anthology of 1845: "The lines are here printed as they were originally written; in later editions the poet changed slightly about forty of the lines." The statement, however, is substantially true, as no verbal changes occur. Such minor alterations are significant of the conscientious care that Longfellow devoted to his work. There are few other poets as self-critical as Longfellow, as there are few that are so filled with a noble humility wholly free from weakness or vacillation.

University of Illinois

DANIEL KILHAM DODGE